



The Flexitarian Way

A growing movement to reduce animal product consumption benefits human health, animal welfare, and the environment

by JULIE FALCONER

For nearly a decade, Dawn Jackson Blatner was a closet meat eater. A registered dietitian and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, Blatner was immersed in issues of food and nutrition. But when it came to describing her own eating habits—mostly plant-based with occasional meat—she was at a loss: Was she a failed vegetarian or a vegetable-loving omnivore?

The American Dialect Society answered the question in 2003 when it declared “flexitarian”—a blend of “flexible” and “vegetarian”—the most useful word of the year. “Finally I and my patients fit somewhere,” Blatner says. And when she pub-

lished *The Flexitarian Diet* in 2008, Blatner added her voice to the rising chorus of nutrition experts, environmentalists, and even government officials exhorting the public to eat more plant-based proteins and less meat.

Health is one driving factor; reduced meat consumption corresponds to lower rates of cancer, heart disease, and obesity. But food choices have become more nuanced in recent years, invoking concerns beyond personal health and waistlines.

In 2006, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization reported that animal agriculture accounts for 18 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions—even more than

transportation (more recent studies suggest the number may be much higher). Meanwhile, through a string of high-profile undercover investigations, The HSUS and other animal protection organizations have drawn worldwide attention to the ugly truths behind industrialized animal agribusiness.

In this new reality, flexitarianism is more than just a useful label. It’s recognition of a middle ground between pure vegetarianism and the meat-centric standard American diet—a goal that even dedicated steak lovers might aim for. “A flexitarian is waking up every day and trying to be more vegetarian,” says Blatner. “It’s not going to be perfect; it’s about progress.”

It’s also a trend that many animal advocates encourage as a pragmatic step toward weaning the Western world off the meat-at-every-meal habit. “Not many people are willing to go from being an ardent meat eater to a vegan overnight,” says Josh Balk, outreach director for The HSUS’s Factory Farming Campaign. “But reducing their consumption of meat, eggs, and dairy greatly helps animals.”

To this end, Balk is working with the nation’s largest food service provider to launch what he calls “perhaps the most important initiative to promote vegetarian eating that any company has ever done.”



On its “Be a Flexitarian” Facebook page, Compass Group North America provides vegetarian recipes and encourages visitors to share their own.

Through its flexitarian campaign launched this month, Compass Group North America is collaborating with its 8,500 dining locations to provide more varied and appealing vegetarian and vegan meals, along with marketing materials to encourage customers to give flexitarian eating a try. The new menu offerings include trendy world cuisines for adventurous palates and familiar American foods prepared without meat to entice more traditional diners.

“We’re pulling together the environmental piece, some of the health and nutrition pieces, the animal welfare piece—it just makes the story a little bit more compelling when you look at it for all those reasons,” says Deanne Brandstetter, Compass Group’s vice president of nutrition and wellness.

It’s not the first time Compass Group has taken progressive action on behalf of animals and the environment. In 2005, its subsidiary, Bon Appétit Management Company, was the first national food service provider to phase out the use of shell (or whole) eggs from hens confined in small battery cages. Soon after, Compass Group committed to purchase all its shell eggs—now 91 million a year—from cage-free facilities.

With its size and diversity of markets—including restaurant chains, cafeterias, and health care services—the company can have a major impact on the food industry, but in the end real change will be driven by the consumer, says Brandstetter. “If we have success and others see that demand is shifting, it will definitely take hold.”

Fortunately, while fad diets cycle in and out of public favor, flexitarianism has all the hallmarks of a dietary choice that will stick. After all, motivation is key to changing ingrained eating habits, and flexitarianism offers an array of incentives. “This isn’t about dieting in the diet sense, that it’s all about weight loss,” says Blatner. “Sure, it can help people lose weight if that’s your motivation, but it can also do so many other things, depending on what your hot button is.”

When the hot button is animal welfare, the argument for eating lower on the food chain is especially compelling. Each year, 10

Flexing Your Food Choices

Whether you do it to help animals, the environment, your health, or your wallet, reducing your consumption of meat and other animal products doesn’t require a drastic diet overhaul. With a few simple steps, you can quickly become a full-fledged flexitarian—a part-time vegetarian.

► REINVENT THE FAMILIAR

Take your favorite foods and tweak them to make vegetarian versions.

Swap the chicken in your burritos for black beans or grilled vegetables. Instead of sour cream, spoon on some guacamole or salsa.

Replace the meat sauce on your pasta with spicy marinara.

Trade burgers and dogs for the many meatless versions on the market. Substitute applesauce, mashed bananas, or Ener-G Egg Replacer for eggs when preparing baked goods—you’ll get all the taste without the cholesterol.



► EXPLORE THE UNKNOWN

Incorporate new foods, recipes, and products into your menu. Stroll through your local grocery store’s “natural foods” aisle, or pop into your community health food store to fill your cart with some of the fantastic vegetarian items available. When dining out, give ethnic restaurants a try: Many of the world’s cuisines have classic vegetarian dishes that will introduce your taste buds to a new variety of flavors and textures.

► SATISFY YOUR CRAVINGS

The meaty flavor you may be craving is called “umami” (Japanese for “savory”), says dietitian and American Dietetic Association spokeswoman Dawn Jackson Blatner. Redirect those cravings to plant-based foods like walnuts, soy sauce, mushrooms, tomatoes, and sweet potatoes. And try the many meat alternative products on the market, from seitan steak strips to deli slices to barbecue ribs—you may like them even better than the meat versions.



► CROWD IT OUT

When you make healthy legumes, grains, nuts, fruits, and vegetables the centerpiece of your plate, you’ll find there isn’t room for meat or other animal products. Blatner tells her clients to think of flexitarianism as being “pro-vegetable” rather than “anti-meat,” she recommends eating at least 2 cups of fruit and 2 ½ cups of vegetables a day.

► KEEP IT HEALTHY

Don’t load up on processed foods, sweets, or dairy products. Fresh fruits and vegetables with whole grains should be your mainstays, as well as plant-based proteins like beans, lentils, peas, and nuts. Get your omega-3s from ground flaxseeds and walnuts, and drink fortified nondairy milks or orange juice for a healthy dose of calcium and vitamins D and B12.



► GIVE YOURSELF A HAND

As you transition to a healthier way of eating, remember that you’re helping to make the world a better place simply by enjoying vegetarian fare.

billion land animals are raised for food in the U.S.; worldwide, that number is nearly 65 billion and projected to increase. The problem is exacerbated by a growing human population and the adoption of Western-style diets in developing nations. Integrating more meatless options into meals is a strategy for combating climate change, which threatens the survival of countless wildlife species, and improving the lives of animals raised for food. "In order to end factory farming, there has to be a reduction in meat consumption," Balk says. "When fewer animals are being raised for food, it will be much easier to eliminate cruel confinement practices and allow the animals to at least have some semblance of a decent life."

The Meat of the Matter

The environmental fallout from animal agriculture may be much worse than previously suspected. A recent study published by the Worldwatch Institute argues that 51 percent of human-caused global greenhouse gas emissions come from the production of meat, eggs, and dairy products, compared to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's 2006 estimate of 18 percent. Other new findings reveal that methane's contribution to global warming has been significantly underestimated. Globally, waste and gas from farm animals produce 35 to 40 percent of human-induced methane emissions.

The silver lining in all this research is that people don't have to wait for expensive, high-tech solutions to lessen their environmental footprint, says Chetana Mirle, a campaigns manager for Humane Society International. Simply by eating fewer animal products, everyone can reduce GHG emissions and help mitigate the impacts of climate change.



Pizza de Résistance

Pizza helped propel Wolfgang Puck to international-icon status, when he cooked up innovative twists on the American favorite at his first restaurant nearly 30 years ago.

More recently, Puck's been known for his promotion of local and sustainably produced foods, even announcing his commitment in 2007 not to sell foie gras, battery cage eggs, veal made from calves confined in crates, and other inhumane products.

In this recipe, he combines the best of both worlds, crafting a pizza that's free of animal products and full of flavor. "A healthy diet

should include great vegetarian dishes," he says. "Whether for small children or grown-ups, vegetables cooked the right way will give your palate great pleasure."

Mediterranean cuisine—with its grains, vegetables, and prolific use of olive oil—is great for busy lifestyles, says Puck, who turns to the flavors and cooking methods of diverse cultures for inspiration in his plant-based meals. "We all know that India has had a vegetarian culture for centuries," he says. "[And] I can easily live with stir-fried Hunan eggplants instead of meat."

VEGAN PIZZA

Yield: Makes 4 8-inch pizzas

1 batch pizza dough (recipe follows)
¼ cup pesto (recipe follows)
1 organic zucchini, thinly sliced
1 fennel bulb, thinly sliced
1 Japanese eggplant, thinly sliced
4 tablespoons olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste
1 tablespoon fresh thyme, chopped

1 pound organic chanterelle mushrooms, cleaned
½ cup red onion, thinly sliced
4 Roma tomatoes, thinly sliced
6 sun-dried tomatoes
1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped
¼ teaspoon red chile flakes (optional)

1. Lightly marinate the zucchini, fennel, and eggplant together in 2 tablespoons olive oil. Season with salt and pepper and small amount of thyme. Sauté or grill and set aside.
2. In a hot pan, add 1 tablespoon olive oil and sauté chanterelle mushrooms.
3. Caramelize the red onions in a separate pan.
4. Roll out pizza dough as directed in the following recipe.
5. Spread the pesto on the dough. Arrange tomato slices on top of pesto. Evenly layer the sautéed mixed vegetables, sun-dried tomatoes, and caramelized red onions. Top with the chanterelle mushrooms.
6. When you remove the pizzas from the oven, sprinkle with the fresh parsley and chile flakes.

All recipes courtesy Wolfgang Puck; dough recipe taken from *Wolfgang Puck Makes It Easy*, Rutledge Hill Press, 2004.

RECIPE BOX

ALL-PURPOSE PIZZA DOUGH

Yield: Makes 4 small pizzas or 2 12-to 14-inch pizzas

2½ teaspoons active dry yeast (1 packet)

1 cup warm water (105 to 115° F)

1 teaspoon agave nectar

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil,

plus additional for brushing the pizza crusts

3 cups all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon salt

1. In the bowl of a stand mixer, or a large bread bowl, dissolve the yeast in the water. Add the agave nectar and stir together. Let sit 2 or 3 minutes, or until the water is cloudy. Stir in the olive oil.

2. KNEADING THE DOUGH BY HAND: Mix together the yeast, agave nectar, water, and olive oil as directed in a medium-size or large bowl. Combine the flour and salt. Fold in the flour a cup at a time using a large wooden spoon. As soon as you can scrape the dough out in one piece, scrape it onto a lightly floured work surface and knead it for 10 minutes, adding flour as necessary until the dough is smooth and elastic.

USING A STAND MIXER: Combine the flour and salt and add to the yeast mixture all at once. Mix it together using the paddle attachment, then change to the dough hook. Knead at low speed for 2 minutes, then turn up to medium speed and knead until the dough comes cleanly away from the sides of the bowl and clusters around the dough hook, about 5 minutes. Hold on to the machine if it bounces around. Turn out onto a clean work surface and knead by hand for 2 or 3 minutes longer. The dough should be smooth and elastic. When you press it with your finger, it should slowly spring back, and it should not feel tacky.

USING A FOOD PROCESSOR: Mix together the yeast, agave nectar, water, and olive oil in a small bowl or measuring cup. Place the flour and salt in a food processor fitted with the steel blade. Pulse once or twice. Then, with the machine running, pour in the yeast mixture. Process until the dough forms a ball on the blades. Remove the dough from the processor and knead it on a lightly floured surface for a couple of minutes, adding flour as necessary, until it is smooth and elastic.

3. Transfer the dough to a clean, lightly oiled bowl, rounded side down first, then rounded side up. Cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and leave it in a warm spot to rise for 30 minutes (you can leave it for up to an hour). When it is ready, the dough will stretch as it is gently pulled.

4. Divide the dough into two to four equal balls, depending on how large you want your pizzas to be. Shape each ball by gently pulling down the sides of the dough and tucking each pull under the bottom of the ball, working round and round the ball 4 or 5 times. Then, on a smooth, unfloured surface, roll the ball around under your palm until it feels smooth and firm, about 1 minute. Put the balls on a tray or platter, cover them with pan-sprayed plastic wrap or a damp towel, and leave them to rest for at least 30 minutes. At this point, the dough balls can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for 1 to 2 days. You will need to punch them down again when you are ready to roll out the pizzas.

5. Preheat the oven to 500° F. Place a pizza stone in the oven to heat. In the meantime, press out the dough. Place a ball of dough on a lightly floured surface. While turning the dough, press down on its center with the heel of your hand, gradually spreading it out to a circle—7 to 8 inches in diameter for small pizzas, 12 to 14 for larger pizzas. Alternatively, use a rolling pin to get an even circle. With your fingers, form a slightly thicker raised rim around the edge of the circle. Brush everything but the rim with a little olive oil, then top the pizza as you like. You can transfer the pizza to a lightly oiled pizza pan or bake it directly on the stone.

6. Assemble the pizza with your topping ingredients.

7. Dust a pizza paddle (also called a baker's peel) with semolina and slip it under the pizza. Slide the pizza onto the baking stone or into the pizza pan (or place the pizza pan on the stone—the heat from the stone will help it achieve a crisp crust). Bake until the rim of the crust is a deep golden brown, about 10 minutes.

8. Use the pizza paddle to slide the pizza out of the oven and onto a cutting board. With a pizza cutter or sharp knife, cut the pizza into slices and serve immediately.

PESTO

Yield: Makes a scant 1/4 cup

12 medium fresh basil leaves, washed, dried, and coarsely chopped

3 medium garlic cloves, coarsely chopped

2 tablespoons pine nuts, lightly toasted

Pinch of kosher salt

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1. In a mortar and pestle, pound the basil, garlic, nuts, and salt until thoroughly mashed. Add the oil, a few drops at a time, until you have a smooth paste.

2. Pesto can also be made in a blender. Pour in the oil first, then the garlic, nuts, and finally the basil leaves. Blend on low to a smooth paste. Season with salt.

TO PREPARE AHEAD: Pesto can be prepared and refrigerated or frozen. Bring to room temperature before using.

